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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000684

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: BELGIAN LEADERS TRY TO AVOID A GOVERNMENT CRISIS:  
AGAIN

Classified By: DCM Wayne Bush, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Belgium's political parties are again locked in intense negotiations over a plan to redistrict the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (B-H-V) province. The change, proposed and supported by the Flemish parties, would divide the multi-lingual region surrounding the capital into a large Flemish electoral district and a smaller bi-lingual (mostly Francophone) district. The Flemings contend the region is both geographically and culturally Flemish and therefore should be joined with Flanders. The Francophone opposition argues that the change would effectively disenfranchise the significant French-speaking population that currently lives in the region. The issue continues to have the potential to bring down the Leterme government. The gravity of the situation was brought home when Leterme cut short his meetings with Chancellor Merkel to return to Brussels for consultations within his party regarding the impasse. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Although the B-H-V issue has been a hot button issue since the late 1960's, this most recent proposal could threaten the fragile balance of the current government. The current redistricting bill, introduced in November 2007, was removed from the House of Representatives, agenda when the Francophone parties initiated a conflict of interest procedure. The Belgian constitution allows each regional, community, and the federal parliament to initiate such a procedure. The procedure prevents a bill or an item from being voted on for a period of 120 days, which is referred to as "cooling off time." The 120-day period for the November redistricting bill expired on April 30th, 2008, placing the bill on the House,s agenda for that day. To avoid a political crisis that would pit Flemish and Francophone parties against one another, Prime Minister Leterme and the majority parties, in a unprecedented move, canceled the House,s plenary session for April 30th. By doing so, Leterme and his allies gave themselves a week to hash out a procedural compromise to avoid a vote on May 8th.

13. (SBU) It is widely thought that leaders of both the Flemish and Francophone parties would like to avoid a vote on the bill. If a vote takes place, the result will be along linguistic lines, the Flemish supporting the change, the Francophones opposing it. The Flemish have a large majority in the House and will therefore win the vote; the Francophones do not want that to happen. The Flemish parties, who have many passionate supporters of the redistricting among their constituents, cannot vote against the bill without a major political fallout. However, they recognize that pushing the bill through could cause the francophone parties to pull out of the governing coalition. Indeed, just yesterday, Prime Minister Leterme initially agreed to postpone the vote until July 15. The Francophones could then invoke the conflict of interest procedure in the Constitution and delay the vote for a further 120 days. However, resistance within the Flemish parties forced Leterme to back down from this strategy.

¶4. (SBU) Neither French nor Flemish parties want a vote along linguistic lines that would trigger a political crisis just a little over a month into the new government. Many observers believe that the current negotiations are centered on finding a procedural compromise that would avoid a B-H-V vote on May 8th, but would allow the Flemish parties to save face in the eyes of their constituents. A further option is to schedule a lengthy budget debate before the debate on the redistricting plan, allowing the government to delay the redistricting vote in the hope of making further progress in the on-going talks.

¶5. (C) If the parties fail to reach a procedural compromise to avoid the vote on May 8th, the bill would be voted on late on the 8th and is likely to pass. A number of scenarios could result. In the most likely scenario, Leterme would resign and new elections would be held as early as June 22nd. In another, Leterme would start a national reconciliation process with the King, leaders of opposition parties, and other national leaders. The exact shape and scope of such a reconciliation are unclear at this moment, but would likely include a pro forma rejection of Leterme's resignation by King Albert, a major national address, and policy steps designed to heal the linguistic rift.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Whatever the result of a potential vote may be, the Francophone parties are likely to initiate a lengthy legal process to prevent the redistricting from taking place on the ground that it violates the linguistic rights of French speakers in the B-H-V region. Leterme will continue to head a deeply divided government where even members of the governing coalition continue to snipe at each other. During last year's long government formation talks, Leterme's regular gaffes weakened his ability to negotiate effectively with francophone parties. Although as PM, he has avoided making more gaffes, he still is unable to reach across Belgium's linguistic divide to build a coherent government with staying power.

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